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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that there seem to be two basic types of films about HIV/AIDS: those produced by mass media (television, movies, news, soap operas) and those produced outside the commercial sphere (independent or "activist" videos and films). According to the paper, "Longtime Companion," "Philadelphia," "It's My Party," "And the Band Played On," and "Jeffrey" fall into the category of those produced by mass media. The paper discusses these major films that deal with HIV/AIDS, as well as a few "gay" films. It also provides many questions for discussion that can be used in the classroom, both general questions about HIV/AIDS and questions geared toward the specific film. Among the paper's conclusions are that, since mass media films are geared to the conventional audience, they tend to have certain characteristics--on the negative side, they are about dying and give a narrow portrayal of sexuality--the more positive side seems to be in the portrayal of family and community. The paper notes that, in the end, the films are a paradox, just as the entire AIDs epidemic has been. Contains 20 references. (NKA)

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Film Portrayal of People with HIV/AIDS

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A presentation at the Annual Film Symposium, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, April 25, 1998

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Film Portrayal of People with HIV/AIDS

The task of providing instruction in sexual communication is challenging, difficult, and crucial. One way that may help students to better communicate about these sensitive topics is by using films in instruction.

In recent years, a genre of HIV/AIDS films has developed (Bader, 1989). Whether these films can be used to improve communication skills remains a question. Research using films to increase safer sex practices has had mixed results. Negative effects may be because of viewer denial and fear (e.g., Morris, 1997). While Goldman suggested the use of films in instruction about AIDS is useful in reducing fear and increasing empathy (1987) and Sawyer suggested film viewing increases perception of AIDS susceptibility (1991), Berrenberg, Rosnik, and Kravcisin suggested film viewing increased fear and dislike of people with AIDS by increasing blame of the victim (1990). Gilliam & Seltzer found that viewing a single AIDS film was simply inadequate for a change in knowledge or attitudes (1989). Kelso found that showing a film failed to increase positive attitudes toward persons with AIDS (1995). In still another study, showing a film had no positive effects on people who already held anti-homosexual or anti-person with AIDS attitudes (Pryor, Reeder, McManus, 1991). In showing films to an interpersonal communication class, University of Missouri-Kansas City students also seemed to have mixed reactions. Perhaps some fears and prejudices are too deeply imbedded for easy change.

There may be hope in using films in more creative ways, however. In one instructional program using instruction and erotic movies, young women on the

pill better understood how vulnerable they are to AIDS and STD contraction and changed their attitudes and behavioral intentions toward condoms (Lagana', 1993). Another study combined film, audiotape, and reading materials designed to increase student empathy and knowledge (Martin, 1993). One instructional study used a film as a stimulus for students to write an essay of a fantasy using a condom (Tanner, 1992).

This link discusses a few major films that deal with HIV/AIDS. Although we have given our perceptions of the films, we have also provided questions for discussion that can be used in the classroom. This kind of instruction is challenging. In one section of interpersonal communication, the topic was introduced during a unit on language use early in the semester, discussed more during a unit on intimate relationships, and film segments were used late in the semester when students seemed to be more comfortable in the classroom. An instructor may want to ask general questions when showing films about HIV/AIDS.

- What are the common characteristics and contributions of these films?
- What does the film contribute to our understanding regarding HIV/AIDS?
- What unrealistic elements and myths do the films perpetuate?
- What can be learned from the film as a method for increasing dialog about HIV/AIDS?
- How might these films be used to help couples talk about safer sex practices?

Types of Films About AIDS

There seem to be two basic types of films about AIDS: "those produced by mass media (television news, soap operas, made-for-TV movies, Hollywood cinema) and those produced presumably 'outside' the commercial sphere (independent or 'activist' videos and films, by communities directly affected by HIV/AIDS)" (Fuqua, 1998, p. 3761). *Longtime Companion, Philadelphia, It's My Party, And the Band Played On,* and *Jeffrey* fall into the category of those produced by mass media.

Although our intention is to discuss the mass audience films, several gay films are worth mentioning for those instructors or students who want to see them. One interesting film in the second category is Terrance McNally's *Love! Valor! Compassion!,* which is a sensitive portrayal of several gay men who have a sense of family.

http:www.wolfvideo.com/valor.shtml

An Early Frost is the classic 1985 Emmy and Peabody Award winner.

http://www.wolfvideo.com?frost.shtml

Parting Glances is about a gay couple trying to hold their relationship together in the middle of lives filled with work and friends.

http://www.wolfvideo.com?glances.shtml

The musical *Zero Patience* is a unique film in the category of films geared to gay audiences.

http://www.planetout.com/popcornq/db/getfilm.html?1233&shop

Zero Patience

Zero Patience (John Greyson, director, 1993) is about the man who started the AIDS epidemic in this country. The farcical musical pokes fun at the political, scientific, and societal realities of the AIDS epidemic. "*Zero Patience*, re-writes the history of 'Patient Zero' highlighting the gaps that the American media and medical community glossed over in their attempts to identify a foreign origin for AIDS, making visible the hidden agendas behind such a project" (Cagle, p. 740).

Who is responsible? Much of the film is about how US Americans fail to talk about sex. The film makes fun of a system that is more concerned with figuring out the origins of AIDS than stopping the epidemic. The scientist out of the past looks for the intellectual piece of the puzzle, but not the human piece. The film focuses on a natural history museum where they set up a display of the "Hall of Contagion." In each display is the human who was responsible for starting the epidemic. This way individuals are blamed for the problems so that no one need discuss societal, sexual, and behavioral issues. The supposed idea is that if one can identify the individual person responsible, no one else need take responsibility for the problem. Once the pronouncement is made that Patient Zero is the origin, he is suddenly invisible and no longer recognized as a human being. Throughout the film, Patient Zero asks to tell the story of his life. He wants to say he was not evil. This theme follows the idea of "The Arabian Nights:" By telling a story, a life will be spared.

- Why was Patient Zero was never allowed to tell his story?
- Why is HIV/AIDS so difficult to discuss?

No other film about AIDS has any reference to **Act Up**--an organization that publicly protests against social, medical, and political injustices. They are considered politically radical even within the gay community. In the film, these gay activists are shown as attacking the scientific research community.

- Why do you think that when the activists are introduced in the film, they are busy talking about taking over control of research and medicine?

The museum display sponsor is a pharmaceutical company, suggesting the **collusion** of the entire medical system regarding the AIDS epidemic. Still today, the major drug companies are the ones financing programs for gays, lesbians, and AIDS because they are the ones that benefit financially from the epidemic. The paradox is that because of the high prices in AIDS drugs--averaging $20,000 per year for an individual--people with HIV/AIDS are in a powerless position.

- Why do some people believe that segments of our society are growing rich on the AIDS epidemic?

One character, George, sits in the Act Up meetings and tries to gain control, not of the system like the other Act Up members, but control of his own life. George is the only one shown trying to keep his job, having a relationship with a lover, and trying to ask hard questions about himself medically because he is receiving contradictory information (which is his frustration in the film). In his song, George says the only thing the medical community is positive about is that he will die; the only thing George is positive about is that he wants to live. Despite the age of this

film, the portrayal is comparable to "the second wave of HIV" in terms of attitudes of people with HIV. The first wave was about dying with AIDS (as is the content of most films) while the second wave is about living with AIDS (a theme in *Zero Patience* and *Jeffrey*).

- The "politically correct label" is "persons living with HIV" or "persons living with AIDS." How is language important in conceptualization?

Although parts of the film may be too pornographic for a college classroom, *Zero Patience* is thought provoking. The scene portraying people and balloons floating in the blood stream, for example, is an comical explanation about cells. Another amusing idea is Michael Callen playing "Miss HIV" in a blonde wig. Callen was a long time survivor, AIDS activist, and entertainer. It is interesting to note that Callen also appears in *Philadelphia* with his musical group, The Flirtations (in the party scene). The net effect is that parts of the film are so outrageous and funny that they become easy to discuss.

- In what ways does humor make it easier to discuss a difficult subject?
- How could you use humor in a conversation about physical intimacy?

Mass Media Films about AIDS

And the Band Played On (Roger Spottiswoode, director, 1993). Relevant to this film, Fuqua (1998) said the stories about AIDS in popular culture "provide competing versions of truth and social reality" (p. 3761). The HBO version of Randy Shilts's *Band Played On* does just that as the film traces the history of the AIDS

epidemic. The content is clear and straightforward as a re-enactment of the years while researchers worked to discover what was happening with this disease. The scientific in-fighting, anti-gay political agenda of the Reagan years, and economic repression of gays are all portrayed in the film.

http://www.planetout.com/popcornq/db/getfilm.html?1894&shop

This movie contains major stars with cameo appearances--Lily Tomlin, Richard Gear, Steve Martin, Phil Collins, Ian McKellen, Alan Alda--making the film more acceptable to watch. When filming began, actors would not commit to the project until the first major star agreed to work. At the time, the topic was as untouchable for Hollywood to make as it was for viewers to watch.

And the Band Played On focused the governmental and scientific aspects of the illness, particularly the epidemiological team. The team was portrayed as the Saints of Science, working with no money, no equipment, no support, no sleep, no relationships. There is a scene, for example, where the scientist agrees to go to New York to investigate, using his own money, saying there was no need to pay him back.

And the Band Plays On dances around the AIDS epidemic at a distance. None of the scientists seem to have any prejudices about what they were doing, nor did they interact with the gay community beyond surveillance.

Only the female scientist is portrayed as empathetic. In one scene, the Broadway producer (Richard Gear) sees the female scientist, then later gives her a donation for her work. Two other scenes--the City Council interaction and when the

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scientist talks to the heterosexual couple--represent the few interactions between science and the people involved in the epidemic.

- Why does so much of the film's portrayal of people seem sterile?
- If scientists cannot talk about the disease, how can intimate couples talk about HIV/AIDS?
- With whom do you feel empathy in this film? The hard-working, government scientist? Men who are gay? The politicians?
- When the scientists talk, they continually ask: "What do you think?" "What do you know?" What can you prove?" Why do they fail to ask: "What do you feel?"

There is the one, lone, maverick scientist faced with overcoming imaginable obstacles. He never loses sight of the goal: To stop an epidemic. The film takes on a *High Noon* motif, as the lone lawman who goes against all odds because it is right. This theme is an easily recognizable one for US audiences.

- How does the film take the focus off the subject matter and put it onto the film's leading character, the medical cowboy?

In this film, the viewer sees little about the lives of the people who are infected. The viewer only meets people through the research investigation with the scientist or in political action settings. The closest one comes is inside the livingroom of Bill Krauss, but even then it was the political setting where his lover is ignored.

- Why does the film fail to show physical intimacy or relational commitment between partners?

- If the film did show these elements, what would the dialog need to say?

In the final minutes, an array of people who have died of AIDS are shown. The ending begins with a candlelight vigil and then shows pictures of people and quilt panels. Meanwhile, Elton John--a recognized AIDS activist and out gay man--sings a song about a son who is dying of AIDS. "I misjudged you. I can't believe you really came."

- Does this point arouse emotion in you? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Why do you think the film introduces the parent-child bond at this point? What is the real tragedy you see in the HIV/AIDS epidemic?
- Why do people avoid responsibility for communicating about physical intimacy?

The relatively recent film, ***Outbreak*** is a fictitious account about AIDS that closely parallels *And the Band Plays On*. The audience thinks they are learning about the way a disease spreads and is stopped. Two glaring problems exist with the film in regards to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. First, there is an attitude that the individual can do nothing to stop the disease, so what is the point in trying? The resignation to becoming infected is a dangerous model in the age of AIDS, when individuals can behave in ways that minimize the threat of AIDS. Second, the determination of a lone researcher magically finds the cure and creates the serum to save everyone. Again, in the age of AIDS, where there is no cure, the model is a dangerous portrayal.

- Why do people take an attitude of resignation about HIV/AIDS, when in fact it is relatively easy to prevent the spread of the disease?

- What can couples do when they enter into a sexual relationship prior to having the emotional maturity or relational development needed to talk about their physical intimacy?

Once **protease inhibitors** came on the market, the public began to assume that AIDS was no longer fatal, and no longer a threat. In fact, the epidemic is spreading in pockets. The viral spread in *Outbreak* fails to provide any valid HIV/AID message because it says that a viral disease is contracted by touching and inhaling, and there is no behavioral way to stop the disease. The film takes all the myths about AIDS and turns them into a film that resurrects and reinforces those myths.

- What myths currently exist about HIV/AIDS?
- Why do some people think that we are losing ground in the spread of this disease?
- For a time, US single parent pregnancy rates were inhibited by the use of condoms. Although they were used to prevent HIV infection, they also prevented unwanted pregnancy. Now those pregnancy rates are going up again because many women no long think HIV is a risk. Why do you think this is happening?

Although the viewer knows the disease is not real, the parallels to the AIDS epidemic are clear. The film plays on fears that the government is behind a national conspiracy related to similar epidemics. The literature suggests that African Americans are extremely distrustful of the government and health care systems which has slowed their access into treatment and care for HIV/AIDS. A film like this plays upon and reinforces those fears.

- Why might certain cultural groups have special concerns about the HIV/AIDS epidemic?
- In what ways might an individual see the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a government conspiracy?

Longtime Companion (Norman Rene, director, 1990). This film shows several loving gay couples during the early years of the epidemic. The story is partly about the evolution and effects of AIDS and partly about the compassion and commitment of a longtime partnership (where both men die of AIDS). Perhaps the most poignant part of the film is about dying--staying by a loved through the worst of times and knowing when to let go.

http://www.wolfvideo.com/longtime.shtml

In this film, the viewer sees people in their everyday lives. There is a family relationship theme with the extended family of gay men. In a eulogy, for example, one gay man says "When I began my relationship with Fuzzy there was never any question that he was one of the family." While some audiences have taken *Longtime Companion* as a definitive movie about what gay life is like, a portrayal of gays that is different from *And the Band Plays On*, (where the only loving relationships were between the political activists).

Promotional material says: "The first mainstream American film to tackle the subject of AIDS with intelligence and honesty, *Longtime Companion* delivers a powerful universal message that until now has been shamefully ignored." In fact, the film appears more progressive than some of the works that followed and the statement is still true nearly 10 years later.

- In what ways are gay relationships portrayed as similar to traditional family relationships?
- There are only two things about relationships that are certain: relationships change and relationships end. What kinds of stresses does death put on an intimate relationship?
- Do you feel a sense of empathy or a lack of empathy toward characters in this film? Explain why.
- Given what we know now, how might effective communication have changed these stories?

Philadelphia (Jonathan Demme, director, 1994). In *Philadel*phia, Tom Hanks plays a successful attorney with AIDS. When his boss discovers his disease, the Hanks character is fired. He sues on discrimination charges.).

- Is empathy toward the character of Tom Hanks--a popular, an all-American-boy type--easy or difficult?
- Is the Hanks character portrayed as a sexual being?
- In the dancing scene with his partner, do the pair come across as a loving relationship? Why or why not?

http://www.planetout.com/kiosk/popcornq/db/getfilm.html?1890

Tom Hanks' character knew the rules of the game, he played by the rules, so he was stunned when his boss said that he was not acceptable. This paradox is part of the American ethnic: Don't ask don't tell.

- Do you think the boss is portrayed as a father figure? Explain your answer.

- What does the "Don't ask, don't tell" value say about our culture?
- How do you think this value may affect how US Americans communicate about sexual intimacy?
- In the film, there is the idea that if you tell or we find out, there are consequences to pay. Why? Why does the Hanks character loose the game?

This film also was the only film that showed people actually infected with HIV. Instead of actors, the film used people who were in end stage of disease during the hospital scenes, thus providing the a realistic portrayal of persons living with HIV.

- How do you feel about people with AIDS?
- What does a person with HIV look like?
- What does a person with AIDS look like?

The morality play in this film seems to be in the courtroom scene where they bring up the fact that he was probably infected during one of three visits to an adult porn theater. His partner is HIV negative. The whole crux of the court case is: He did this to himself by doing deviant activities. The Hanks character is not a victim, but the one deserving God's wrath upon the sinful.

- Is there an implication that gay films are responsible for the spread of HIV?
- What do you think is the major type of sexual activity that causes the spreading of AIDS?

The attorney only takes the case when he sees the discrimination that is played out against Hanks. The wife of the lawyer, however, asks the husband if he

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knows anyone who is gay. When he says "No," she names off family members from both sides of the family who are gay. While the wife tries to break down stereotypes, the scene dissolves into them making fun of gay male sexuality ("I wouldn't let anyone do that to me," as they giggle and are sexual with each other). In the end, the attorney fails to change his homophobia, although he comes close to one gay man.

- The film took two of the most discriminated against minority groups in the US to play off each other. Why?
- Do these characters make fighting discrimination more acceptable?
- Do you think there is a clash between gay culture and the African American community?
- Some people believe the African American co-culture is more religious and matriarchal than most US American co-cultures. What affect might that have on attitudes toward homosexuality?

The majority of the film takes place in the sterile, impersonal setting of an office or courtroom. There is little display of affection between characters, little emotion, little expression of feelings. They are taking the issues of family dynamics and acting them out in the workplace. The Tom Hanks character has a supporting family, which never questions his sexuality or this diagnosis. He has a loving, understanding partner who stands by him during all aspects of his ordeal.

- Do you think this portrayal is typical of most families that have a member with AIDS?
- Do you think most parents and children are able to communicate about sex and sexuality? Explain your answer.

It's My Party. *It's My Party begins* as a story about a loving gay couple. When one man finds out that he is HIV+, the information creates stresses that are more than the relationship can bear. In contrast to *Philadelphia*, the audience sees the devastation the AIDS diagnosis can wreak in a relationship. In this case, there is no loving supportive father because he devalued his son when he found out he was gay. There is no accepting mother because she is upset over her loss. There is no accepting partner because he is scared he will contract the disease.

- Do you think this portrayal is realistic?
- Do you think this would be similar to the stories one would hear at a meeting of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)?

As the virus progresses into AIDS, the lead character discovers that in a matter of days he will lose his mental abilities. Rather than allow that to happen, he throws a party to say good-bye to all his friends. At the end of the two day celebration, he kills himself so that he can die in the company of his family.

- Have you ever heard of someone planning her or his own funeral?
- Have you ever heard of someone planning her or his own funeral and participating?

The lead character controls the last days of his life because he failed to control his life in his illness. What throws the party off balance is when the crasher comes: the ex-lover, brought in by the woman friend who is trying to "fix" everything. At the party, we meet a cast of stereotypes: the alcoholic father who fails to come to terms with his son's sexuality, the clinging mother, the "fag hag," the "campy"

friend, the perfect ex-lover who failed to cope with the disease, the boyfriend parade, the source of the "custody battle" for the surrogate child (the dog).

What do we see in the relationships and the **way people communicate**? The parents are estranged, just as the lovers. The friends are shallow, just like the lovers. The high drama sarcasm of throwing a party to kill oneself at the end is not about saying "goodbye," but about making people feel guilty about the failure of their relationships. There was nothing in their lives to celebrate, so they had to celebrate death.

- Is this film is about failure of family? The failure of friends?
- Are there any examples of good modeling about how to communicate about safer sex or how to negotiate effective relationships.
- Why is the only interaction with a gay man through partying, liquor, multiple partners, and guilt?

Boys on the Side (Herbert Ross, director). *Boys on the Side* portrays three women who are outcasts--a heterosexual woman with AIDS, a lesbian, and a murderer--who band together to establish their own family. All three women are running from something. Toward the end of the film, they give an extended definition of family and refer to themselves as one.

The film faces issues with a sense of **realism** important to discussions of HIV/AIDS. First, the woman with AIDS feels like an outcast with nowhere to go. She deals with the enormity of facing such a crisis alone. She tries to deal with the disease by re-enacting a trip she took with her family the last time she felt safe.

Second, the film portrays **sexuality**. Domestic violence, sexual desires, and the enormity of sexual attraction are intertwined. Touching, emotions, desires, and sexual behaviors are portrayed in the story.

Third, the film raises issues about **dating when infected**. When the dating scene was shown to an undergraduate class, it prompted discussion about the clarity and assertiveness the woman showed toward her date and her friend. The man says he will protect himself with a condom because he knows she AIDS. Effective communication skills are modeled in the film as the viewer can consider various issues. In fact, this film portrays sexuality realistically. When she chooses not to have sex, she ends her life as a sexual being.

- How should heterosexual couples communicate about physical intimacy?
- Who has the right to tell if someone is HIV positive?
- How should someone tell the partner?
- What are safe behaviors with someone who is infected?
- Can a partner guess if someone has HIV by the way she looks?

According to Hogan (1998), *Boys on the Side* is a "framework of the classic nurturing woman to render 'queer' AIDS more acceptable, yet in so doing, press women into conventional roles of mothers, caretakers, wives...through sentimental images of women as self-abnegating caretakers whose own health and bodies are rendered irrelevant and incidental" (p. 4270).

Jeffrey (Christopher Ashley, director, 1995). Perhaps *Jeffrey* is the best example of a film that can appeal to conventional audiences, a film capable of sensitizing an audience to many of the issues surrounding AIDS. Jeffrey is a gay man who decides

that sex in the age of AIDS is too dangerous, so he will avoid relationships and stop having sex. Meanwhile, Jeffrey becomes part of a "magnet" friendship, where he is negative and his friend is positive. The film is about his struggle over whether or not a loving relationship is worth the risks involved. Among the topics considered are staying in a sexual relationship with someone infected with AIDS, gay pride, gay bashing, mother-son relationships, pumping up to look physically perfect even when sick, and taking emotional risks.

http://www.wolfvideo.com/jeffrey.shtml

The film is about someone choosing to **live with AIDS**. The film portrays the romance of a gay relationship instead of anonymous sexual encounters. The people are less like a family and more like regular couples. Although they try to find blind dates for their friends, they avoid the parenting role. There is no group of six to ten friends that run around together in this film. Each couple is just like the couple next door, except for one thing.

Early in the film, the couple kisses passionately. There is a cutaway to two heterosexual couples watching the film in a film theater. The men groan in disgust as the women "o-o-o" that they find kissing a man attractive. For a heterosexual audience, this technique directly confronts the audience reaction to depicting a physical relationship. For a gay audience, this technique acknowledges what happens in reality when gay audience members must listen to reactions of disgust from heterosexual audiences (especially men).

One particularly interesting scene gives the viewer insights into our inability to discuss physical intimacy. There is a point when Jeffrey needs advice. He asks the

audience to consider what it would be like if we could talk to our parents about sex. Jeffrey makes a fantasy phone call where he calls his parents to say he is no longer having sex. They both talk on extensions, giving Jeffrey relaxed, blunt advice about safer sex practices and discussing his preferences. The scene's completely ridiculous nature clearly says: "People cannot talk in an open way about sex." While one would hope that parents could talk to their children about sex, in fact, most fail to do so.

Few people ever see communication about physical intimacy modeled. If parents have conversations about their own physical intimacies, they have them when the children are not around. The very nature of intimate communication is that it is private, between only two people. Thus, many people have no idea how to have such a conversation.

- One technique for talking to children about sex is to read books to the child before she or he is old enough to understand. By the time the child understands, the parent is comfortable with the words. What other techniques might help parents to better communicate about sex?
- To whom can you talk about physical intimacy and sexual matters?

Conclusions

AIDS has brought a visibility and apparent acceptability to gay people which previously did not exist. Small areas of hate do exist, but these are overwhelmed by a growing gay visibility and power. Paradoxically, AIDS has saved the gay community while simultaneously threatening to destroy it. But with AIDS films

> (*Longtime Companion, Philadelphia*) the positive transformation by AIDS has been diluted by commercial forces. . . . The time of AIDS as a savior was brief. (Dixon, 1998, p. 2466)

The mass media films about AIDS that are geared to the conventional audience tend to have certain characteristics. On the negative side, they are about dying, give a narrow portrayal of sexuality, and tend to stereotype people. As one student said, these films use "controlling images." The more positive side seems to be in the portrayal of family and community.

Dying with AIDS. Most films about AIDS are about dying; they fail to deal with the idea of living with HIV/AIDS. Feature films often portray homosexuality in ways that are campy (e.g. *Birdcage*) or tragic (e.g. *Philadelphia*), perhaps as a way to enable middle US America to deal with the subject. Filmmakers seem to believe they must use "tear jerkers" to receive a positive response from the audience.

Narrow Portrayal of Sexuality. These films provide a narrow portrayal of sexuality. In fact, in today's films, HIV/AIDS issues are often the main way gay life is depicted. Perhaps filmmakers think that if relationships are asexual, they are more acceptable. In *And the Band Played On*, for example, the film shows the nature of the developing HIV/AIDS epidemic and although showing many people who are gay, the only physical contact depicted is one hug between two men. About *Philadelphia*, one film critic observed that the intimacies are "almost entirely verbal. In fact, the sight of Hanks and Banderas dancing together looks awkward and silly."

- Why is the portrayal of sexuality so narrow in films about a sexually transmitted disease?
- Is there some portrayal of physical intimacy that might have helped give you ideas about how to communicate more effectively in intimate situations?

Controlling Images of Men. There are basically three stereotypes of gay men depicted in AIDS films.

First, we see the workaholic, political activist, who is the morality of the gay community (*And the Band Plays On*). He cannot maintain a personal life because he is working so selflessly for the greater good. He also maintains the morality of the community. In *And the Band Played On*, when this character became ill, everyone was horrified because AIDS should not happen to him.

Second, we see the wealthy party boys. They generate sympathy only because it is a shame to lose young creative geniuses (*It's My Party, Longtime Companion*). When *Longtime Companion* was showed in an undergraduate interpersonal communication course, the characters failed to elicit empathy, perhaps because all characters are white, upper-middle-class, successful men who hide their homosexuality at the office during the week while partying with the boys on the weekend. They were powerful until the illness took their power away.

Third, we see the effeminate, outrageous gay stereotype (*Jeffrey*, and *Love! Valor! Compassion!*). Homosexuals are portrayed as amusing, campy characters.

- Do you agree with the descriptions of stereotypes in these films?
- How do the stereotypes compare to your own experience? To reality?

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- What communication problems are inherent in stereotyping?

Controlling Images of Women. The portrayal of women in these films is also narrow. The derogatory term "fag hag" is used in the gay community to describe a woman whose primary intimate social relationship is with a homosexual man. She tends to be the only straight woman within a small clique of gay men, and she is considered one of the boys. She is asexual other than panting over gay men she cannot have. This insulting stereotype describes the main female character. Women are relegated to the weak-caretaker or wistful-friend role. In *Parting Glances* their best friend was the overweight, woman who was their best friend and confidant. She had no sexual relationships outside the couple. In *Longtime Companion*, a single woman lurks in the background). In *It's My Party*, the Margaret Cho character longs for a sexual relationship with the gay couple: "When the dog was a puppy, she slept between those men in bed, the lucky bitch!" At another point when a woman lovingly says to a gay man: "What a shame you're gay." He responds with "What a shame you're a woman." The impression is that these men would be "perfect" for these women if it were not for their sexuality.

- Why are these images of men and women in these films so common?

Sense of Family. The most positive films tend to be ones that portray a sense of family. If there are more than three gays in a film, by creating an extended family, the portrayal is more palatable, with which the audience can better identify (e.g. *Love! Valor! and Compassion, Longtime Companion, Jeffrey, It's My Party*). Gay communities have been defined by the way they share a sense of gay identity, which has given rise to a distinct gay community (Parker & Carballo, 1990; Weeks, 1987).

Through illustration of these communities, films begin to give a more realistic portrayal.

- Do you find the portrayal of family realistic?
- Does it create empathy?
- What does it contribute to possible improved communication?

At their worst, films about AIDS cause the viewer to affirm prejudices against gays and people who are HIV infected. At best, films about AIDS arouse the viewer to understand and feel compassion. While some people say we are watching God's wrath, other's say we are watching our worst inhumanity toward each other. The films are a paradox, as the entire AIDS epidemic has been.

- Does the epidemic belong to someone else or are each of us responsible?
- Do we wait for the medical industry to find answers or do we take the initiate to protect ourselves?
- Does the HIV epidemic say more about gays or more about straights?
- More about society or the individual?

  What can people do to improve our communication skills in physically intimate situations?

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